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A LETTER

CONCERNING

MR HENRY IRVING

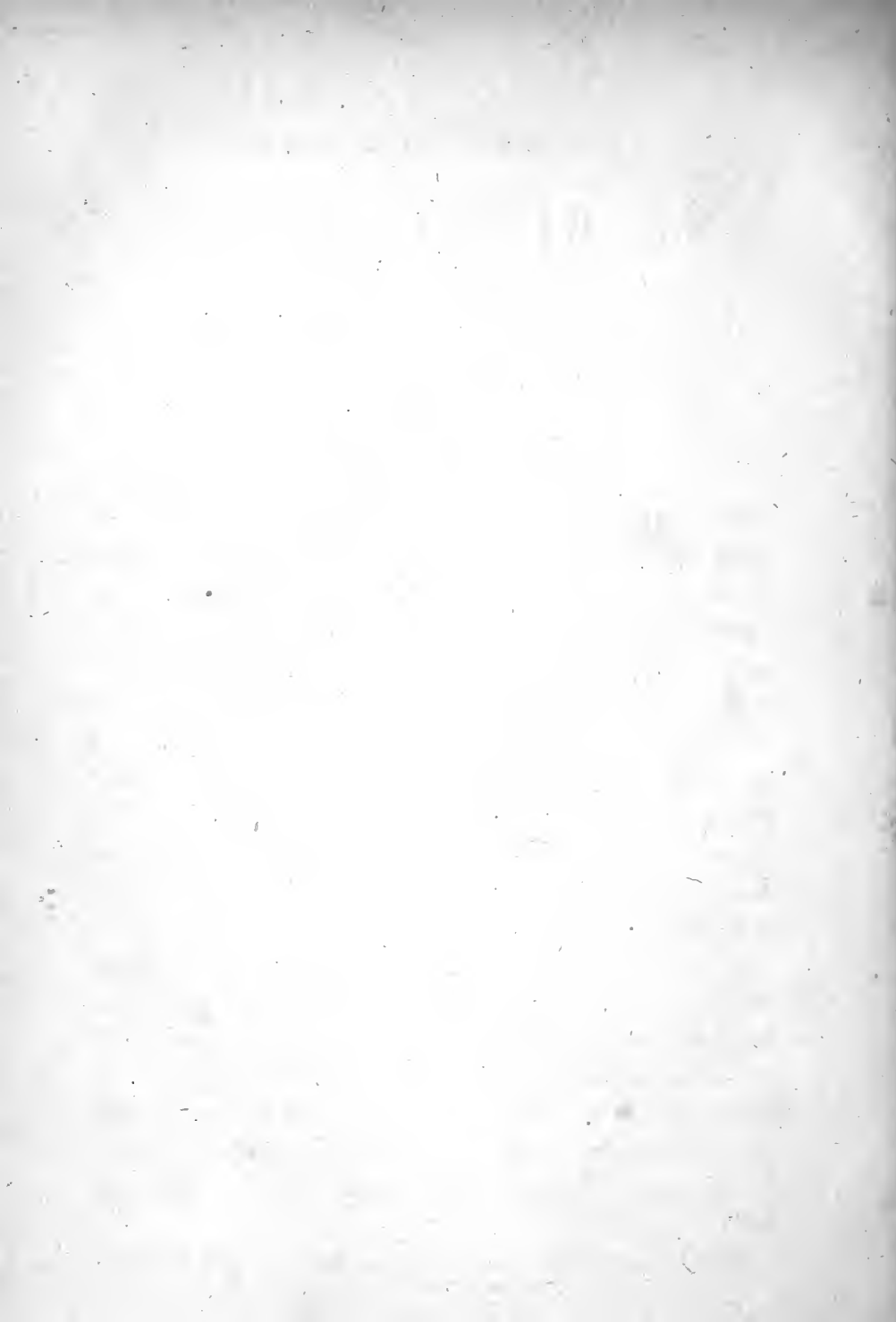
ADDRESSED TO

E. R. H.

“Good breeding lies in human nature, and is due from all men
towards all men.”—CARLYLE.

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A LETTER CONCERNING
MR HENRY IRVING

ADDRESSED TO

E. R. H.

November 2, 1877.

SIR,—During the last few weeks, playgoers in certain of our leading towns have been made aware of the existence of a pamphlet, consisting of an examination of the claims of Mr Irving to the eminence he has attained as an actor. This production may or may not have been successful; but if successful, it is more a testimony to the popularity of the actor than to the pungency of the “criticism,” which is neither truthful nor brilliant. The public are so deeply interested in Mr Irving, that anything devoted to the subject of his impersonations is bound to receive a certain amount of notice.

Now, this pamphlet is not fair. It is almost wholly a mere *ex parte* attack, written by one whose extraordinary thesis is, that “Mr Irving is one of the worst actors that ever trod the British stage in so-called ‘leading’ characters,” and who, to prove that thesis, is guilty of the grossest exaggeration, as well as of very disingenuous suppression of material facts.

Of course, there was a large extent of good which

the writer of the pamphlet was compelled, in common honesty, to concede to Mr Irving. He is forced to confess that his *Digby Grant* is "excellent,"—that his "first performances of *Mathias* in 'The Bells' were certainly wonderful,"—that "even up to his first appearance as *Hamlet*, his faults had not grown up in him to any morbid extent,"—that originality "in a certain sense" "cannot be denied him,"—that "he is possessed of a spirit of innovation which is not always misdirected,"—that "some of his readings are ingenious,"—that he is an "intellectual" actor,—that his fencing in "*Hamlet*" is "admirable,"—"that the combat in '*Macbeth*' is particularly well-managed,"—that he is entitled to the merit of "elaboration,"—and that "he has the taste to substitute Shakespeare's '*Richard III.*' for Colley Cibber's." But even this modicum of praise is very grudgingly accorded, and generally qualified by an accompanying sneer. In fact, there is obvious throughout the pamphlet a decided *animus* against the artist who is the subject of it, and whose services to the Drama, as well as the high reputation he enjoys, should have earned for him criticism certainly of a courteous, if not favourable kind.

My object may be very briefly stated. I have no intention of doing for Mr Irving the reverse of what this pamphleteer has done for him. I am convinced that indiscriminate praise would be as distasteful to him as indiscriminate blame. My only desire is to counteract, as far as possible, such false impressions as may have been conveyed by a perusal of this pamphlet. I, like the writer of that pro-

duction, have no personal knowledge of Mr Irving, and have no personal end to serve. I am an admirer of his honest work; and while his defects as an actor are not disallowed, something at least should be put forward on the other side. I had, on first perusing the pamphlet I refer to, but one feeling, and that feeling one of indignation, that anything so thoroughly prejudiced should have been advanced by a writer laying claim to the honourable designation of "critic." To this feeling I am now anxious to give expression, though without falling, I trust, into the extreme of extravagance observable in the language of Mr Irving's latest censor.

I will take up this gentleman's contentions one by one.

He opens with the thoroughly erroneous statement, that "no actor of this, or indeed of any other age, has been so much or so indiscriminately belauded as Mr Irving." Mr Irving has, undoubtedly, had his hearty eulogists, both in the metropolis and the provinces; but our pamphleteer is a living testimony to the fact that he has had his (literary) enemies. As a matter of fact, it would be far more correct to say, that "no actor of this, or indeed of an other age, has been so much or so indiscriminately traduced" as Mr Irving. Certainly, no one has been more loudly or eloquently blamed by those who did not and do not admire his acting. If "certain critics have ransacked their by no means limited vocabulary in the search for words in which to express his greatness," they have been equally assiduous in discovering epithets of an uncomplimentary nature. But that

they have done so is, after all, only one more proof of the remarkable character of Mr Irving's impersonations. The very vituperation he has aroused is only an additional testimony to the originality of his conceptions; and, so far, is a distinct compliment to his peculiar powers. It is only incompetence or commonplace that escapes detraction. The higher the flight taken, the more numerous the arrows that attempt to bring you down.

"For more than five years," continues our pamphleteer, "Mr Irving has been the 'bright particular star' of the British dramatic firmament. Night after night he has filled the dingy old Lyceum. . . . In the provinces he has met with the same success. . . . Men of science, men of learning, poets, philosophers, vie with each other in singing his praises. Bishops eulogise him in after-dinner speeches." Well, what of that? Is not that rather an argument in Mr Irving's favour? To be admired by the admired—*laudari a viris laudatis*—is not that a distinction to be envied? If Mr Irving is so highly estimated by the most able and most cultivated men of the time, would it not seem to show that he must be worthy of the estimation? If Mr Irving admittedly fills big theatres to suffocation, does not the presumption follow that he can hardly be "one of the worst actors that ever trod the British stage?" Our pamphleteer admits that among Mr Irving's admirers are the cream of the intellect of the land. If so, all I can say is, that the admiration of a Huxley, a Gladstone, a Tennyson, and a Blackie, is not to be despised, nor the testimony of bishops to be disre-

garded. They prove at least that if Mr Irving is not a perfect actor (and was there ever one?), he is a highly distinguished one, and one whose performances are worthy of study and earnest consideration. Mere eccentricity would not arouse the very unusual excitement which has resulted and still results from Mr Irving's appearances,—an excitement which has even enabled inferior actors to enhance their popularity by burlesquing the salient points of their master. No amount of puffing, however well directed,—no amount of advertising, however well arranged,—could (had it been attempted), have aroused the universal interest which is evinced in his performances. I am driven, therefore, to the conclusion, either that the pamphleteer is right, or that society as a body is wrong; and the former must forgive me, if, with all due appreciation of his cleverness, I prefer to take my place among the latter.

But to go more particularly into the charges which this writer brings against the actor. To begin with, he denies by implication that Mr Irving can either “move or speak like a normal, rational human being.” His gait is criticised as awkward, and his pronunciation as defective. His figure is characterized as “weak” and “loosely built,” and his face as “very limited” in the range of its expression. Now, it is a delicate matter to describe the personal appearance of any one, and especially of a public man. Most people of good taste would shrink from it; still, it is sometimes unavoidable, and as our pamphleteer has not shrunk from it, neither can I. And I confess

at the outset, that Mr Irving, in physique, is not conspicuously well fitted for the more heroic parts of tragedy. Physique, however, is not everything, even in heroic parts; and many of our great tragedians have not been men of unusual breadth and substance. Nor is it entirely necessary that they should be—it may sometimes be of advantage when they are, but it is by no means indispensable. The great thing to have is—*genius*. The possessor of that can create effects from which not even a “weak, loosely built” frame can detract very largely, if at all.

Now Mr Irving’s figure, as it happens, is for many parts particularly suitable. Who shall say it is unfitted to that of the much-meditating *Hamlet*? Who shall say it is unfitted to that of the remorseful *Mathias*? Has it even been found to take from the kingly dignity of *Charles I.*? Mr Irving certainly has mannerisms, and marked ones; but can we point to any great actor who had not? We have all read of John Kemble’s; and are Macready’s and Charles Kean’s forgotten? But surely it is only a one-sided criticism which fastens upon minor blots, and suffers them to overspread the whole description. This is but microscopic work.

“Whoever thinks a faultless piece to see,
Thinks what ne’er was, nor is, nor e’er shall be.”

As to not speaking like a “rational human being,” the British public is perhaps the best judge of that. Mr Irving has for many years delighted that public, and Mr Irving is, if we are not deceived, a scholar and a gentleman; certainly he can write good English.

Let those who witness Mr Irving’s acting, look

first at the general effect. They leave the theatre in a condition of unmistakeable wonder and admiration at the actor's varied power. The *tout ensemble* has impressed them. Surely that is all that is required? But still more may be said. Mr Irving is so far from being invariably unintelligible in speech, that many and many are the occasions on which by a single tone he strikes a hundred chords of feeling. So far is he from being invariably ungainly in his motions, that many and many are the situations in which, by a single step or stride, he expresses more than some would be able to express in half-a-dozen speeches. So far is he from being invariably comical in gesture, that many and many are the times in which, by a lifting of the much-abused eyebrows, or by a movement of the nervous hands, he conveys a meaning hitherto undreamt of. If his voice is, as our critic says, "naturally harsh," all the greater credit must be his for doing what he does with it. If his figure is, as our critic declares, weak and loosely built, it is all the more wonderful that he is able to create the illusions that he does. If his motions are, as our critic avers, so exceedingly ungainly, how is it that they are watched night after night with positively breathless interest? An actor who can attain success as *Digby Grant*, *Mathias*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III.*, *Cardinal Richelieu*, and *King Charles I.*, can hardly be very expressionless in feature. I wonder if our critic has ever seen Mr Irving as *Philip of Spain*, in Tennyson's "Queen Mary?"

Now for the minor counts of the indictment.

Allowing to Mr Irving the praise of "intellectu-

ality," and even of "originality" in some degree, the writer again falls foul of his "picturesqueness" and "vividness," which he describes as "moving and standing and attitudinizing on the stage, as no actor, and, what is worse, no human being ever did before." The uncritical character of the observation is at once apparent. What does the writer want? Does he wish to reduce Mr Irving to his (the writer's) dimensions, or to those of an histrionic automaton? Would he, if deliberately asked the question, prefer a *Richard* with a level elocution, and stereotyped strides and gestures, to the really "picturesque" and "vivid" impersonation of Mr Irving? If he would not, why all this prolonged sneering at personal peculiarities? The question is, Does Mr Irving call up before us the visions of the men he undertakes to represent? If he does, and if in doing so he makes use of certain tones and motions, it is very unprofitable to be for ever complaining of those tones and motions. They are Mr Irving's means towards an end, and if that end is reached successfully, the means by which it is attained must be legitimate. I do not deny that some people trained in the old school of tragedy are liable to be a little shocked occasionally by Mr Irving's sayings and doings. But that is no fault of Mr Irving's. He starts confessedly from no other standpoint than that which his own intelligence suggests. He throws tradition aside, and gives us the fruit of his own thought and study. The result, we are bound to say, is, in the majority of instances, remarkably successful. Sneers may be directed against special points, and indeed, the human

mind being constituted as it is, exception will always be taken to the greatest works of art. But this does not prevent us from recognizing that Mr Irving's performances are, as a whole, singularly "picturesque" and "vivid," and frequently by reason of the very peculiarities against which our pamphleteer directs his peculiar wit.

A large portion of the pamphlet under notice is occupied in decrying the "psychological subtlety" which has been attributed to Mr Irving. Granting that this quality may justifiably be accorded to the actor's "studies of murder, mesmerism, and nightmare," the writer goes on to analyse unfavourably his impersonations of Shakespeare's characters. It is not necessary to follow him in all his wanderings. I will take up simply what he says about Mr Irving's *Hamlet* and *Richard III*.

The charge against the former is that we get in Mr Irving's conception no indication of the Prince's madness, whether real or assumed (and the pamphleteer is quite convinced that it was either one or the other); that in the scene with *Polonius* Mr Irving is rude and impertinent; and that in the scene with *Ophelia* he is like a tyrannical guardian ordering off a girl to school. This, it would appear, is the sum-total that our "critic" has to urge against Mr Irving's *Hamlet*. It is not a very formidable indictment, but it may as well be answered. Of course, the scene with the Queen in her closet is, by accident, not alluded to. As regards Mr Irving's conception of the Prince's character, so long as it is psychologically consistent, we surely have no right to question it. You

may take what view of *Hamlet* you please—you may represent him as mad, or as feigning madness, or as merely weakly hysterical—with the hysteria of a fine mind overthrown by its contact with the supernatural and its contests with itself. Any one of these conceptions could easily be defended from the poet's text. Mr Irving's conception I take to be the last of those put forward; and, whether you agree with it or not, you must acknowledge that it is worked out artistically and consistently. That is the praise which all the leading critics give to Mr Irving, that even where his actions are most opposed to ordinary received opinion, they are invariably reasonable, and invariably realised with effect. As for the scenes with *Polonius* and *Ophelia*, it is by no means true that Mr Irving's *Hamlet* either insults the one or bullies the other. Accept Mr Irving's idea of the Prince's disposition, and his conduct to *Polonius* is quite natural. He regards him as a tedious old fool sent to spy upon him, and takes a keen delight in throwing dust into his eyes. He is in a state of high excitement, and in no mood to exchange compliments even with *Ophelia's* father; the less inclined to do so, doubtless, because he *is* *Ophelia's* father. Towards *Ophelia* again, his feeling is even more acute and overstrained. Not only is his mind unhinged, but his passions are thoroughly roused; and the discovery of her complicity in the trick played upon him, excites in him a whirlwind of very natural indignation, mingled with the pity and the sorrow born of hardly-controllable love. This we take to be Mr Irving's view of the situation, and

it is perfectly defensible, and therefore perfectly legitimate. And this we take from Mr Irving's own words, as written in an early number of the *Nineteenth Century*. Coming up to the point where *Hamlet* discovers that his interview with *Ophelia* has been spied upon by her Father and the King, Mr Irving writes :—

“ And now *Hamlet's* excitement reaches its greatest height. Goaded within and without, nay, dragged even by his own feelings in two opposite directions, in each of which he suspects he may have gone too far under the eyes of malignant witnesses, he is maddened by the thought that they are still observing him, and as usual, half in wild exultation, half by design, begins to pour forth more and more extravagant reproaches on his kind. He must not commit himself to his love, nor unbosom his hate, nor has he a moment's pause in which to set in order a continued display of random lunacy. As usual, passion and preconceived gloomy broodings abundantly supply him with declamation, which may indicate a deep meaning, or be mere madness, according to the ears that hear it ; while through all his bitter ravings there is visible the anguish of a lover forced to be cruel, and of a destined avenger almost beside himself with the horrors of his provocation and his task. The shafts fly wildly, and are tipped with cynic poison ; the bow from which they are sped is a strong and constant, though anxious nature, steadily, though with infinite excitement, bent upon the one great purpose fate has imposed upon it. The fitful excesses of his closing speech are the twangings of the bow from which the arrow of avenging destiny shall one day fly straight to the mark.”

Now, why does our critic run away with the notion that his idea of *Hamlet* is of necessity the only true one ? There are people who form their ideas of Shakespeare from the plays the poet wrote. Hazlitt and Lamb were such ; there are other people who form their opinions of Shakespeare's men and

women from the traditions of the stage; and in this class, I fear, is the author of the pamphlet under review. Mr Irving goes to the fountain-head for inspiration—our Mr Critic to the playhouse, where conceptions, once vivid, when presented by their creators, become, indeed, “stale, flat, and unprofitable,” when filtered through the mediocrity of commonplace minds. Here is a version which, to thousands of students of Shakespeare, reveals new beauties and new thoughts, is more human and more unstaged; and pray let us give it all the praise it deserves. Pray let us welcome it for what it really is—a new contribution to the study of the most wonderful imaginative character ever conceived by man. And we are not singular in our opinion. Dr Edward Dowden, no mean authority, in his *Shakspeare Primer*, has lately written this: “And once again an English Shakspeare actor of distinction has appeared in the person of Mr Irving. More than 300 hundred years after Shakspeare’s birth, his fame seems still in its great morning.”

Mr Irving’s *Richard III.* the pamphleteer calls a “cheap Mephistopheles,” and says Mr Irving “fails to convey any impression either of the tremendous mental power of Shakespeare’s *Richard*, or of the dignity which should be apparent through all the bodily deformity.” Now, this is arrant dogmatism. To talk of the absolute dignity of *Richard* under every circumstance is nonsense.

“Why, I can smile and murder whiles I smile,
And cry “Content” to that which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
And frame my face to all occasions.

I can add colours to the chameleon,
 Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
 And set the murderous Machiavel to school."

The *Richard* of the stage has hitherto been Colley Cibber's—a distinctly inferior personage to Shakespeare's, just as Shakespeare's is distinctly contrary to history's. Mr Irving's merit is that he has given us the *Richard* of the poet, with a fidelity which speaks volumes for his common sense, if not his "subtlety." The general effect is wonderfully fine, and entirely nullifies any attempt at hypercriticism, even had that hypercriticism any element of truth to recommend it.

So far, we have followed Mr Irving's critic in most, if not all, of his objections, and come now, and lastly, to the sentences in which he carefully sums up his theory. According to him, "Mr Irving possesses, in spite of physical defects, the makings of an excellent actor"—so that, if the worst come to the worst, Mr Irving can step from the eminence he occupies, and begin his career again with at least some hopes of success. This is sublime. The good man does not seem to see that Mr Irving has already "made much of tragedy"—unless, indeed, he does not regard *Hamlet* and *King Richard* as tragedy, or deliberately thinks that Mr Irving has failed in both! "What he required was careful training in a good dramatic school. . . . What he actually received was the slovenly haphazard training of provincial and minor metropolitan theatres." By the bye, which was the minor metropolitan theatre? and we have been under the impression all this time, that the hard work and varied experience of the provinces were

the best possible training for a modern actor ! What would our critic put in place of it ? "A National Theatre, with good endowment, good traditions, good government."

But this is merely twaddle. What has the *Theatre Français* done for French acting ? It has made it polished and rounded, to be sure, but it has made it uniform and dull. We do not say a National Theatre might not do good, under some conditions ; but if it were to do nothing more than train up our artists to be as like each other as two peas, it would not be worth much. To men like Mr Irving it would probably do irremediable harm, for it would repress their individuality, and make them mere followers of tradition. Art is not immutable, and it is the privilege of genius to be continually adding to its canons. It must be left to posterity to judge how far Mr Irving's contributions to these canons are to be permanent. Suppose that in the meantime they commend themselves, if not to our critic, at least to the good judgment of the best available judges ?

One more point referred to in the pamphlet remains to be discussed. We mean the occasional allusions to what the writer is good enough to call Mr Irving's "artistic failure." The pamphleteer is a little too hasty, we venture to say, in taking for granted that Mr Irving is, like the Caucasian, played out. "With his artistic failure, fails the hope, for some time at least, of the establishment of a permanent school of Shakesperean acting in England." There is something quaint in the impudence of this observation, which is at the same time remarkably at variance

with the writer's opening confession as to the tragedian's popularity. According to his own showing, Mr Irving has "for five years been the 'bright particular star' of the British dramatic firmament." Has his reputation been lowered or raised in the course of these five years? Does he draw smaller or less cultivated or less admiring audiences than he did? The answer is obvious. His reputation has grown day by day, until it is almost impossible to imagine it more splendid than it is. Are there any signs of its approaching decadence? None whatever. Mr Irving is now making his second tour of the provinces, and he is being received everywhere with even greater acclamation than he was received with last year. Why should he not go on as he has begun, accumulating success upon success? There are certain lines of the drama in which he has no living equal. By virtue of that very qualification alone he will maintain his position as the leading actor of our stage. No living native artist has so wide a range; and he could therefore maintain, by reason only of his versatility, the high position which he has secured as an exponent of Shakespeare and the romantic drama. Regarded from all sides, he is, without exception, the foremost dramatic artist of his country, and as such he need have no fear of being neglected in his lifetime, or of being forgotten by succeeding generations. He cannot be forgotten. The man who has played *Hamlet* for two hundred consecutive nights, to crowded audiences, has made a mark upon his time which cannot be erased.

And now, sir, I have done. Perhaps you may

know the distinguished writer of this pamphlet, and the companion who assisted him in his novel scheme. Perhaps they are both young men, who may hereafter look with regret upon their questionable work. If this result should be attained, some unexpected good may yet be done them. I hope so ; and as they have deliberately attempted to ridicule an artist who has given pleasure and instruction to hundreds of thousands of his countrymen, I beg them, for the sake of any dear or honourable ties they may have, to commit to memory, and bear in mind these words—" Good-breeding lies in human nature, and is due from all men towards all men."

I am,

Sir,

Yours obediently,

YORICK.

